

How to be a Reliable 'Mainstream' Journalist

By [Media Lens](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

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There are certain rules you need to follow as a journalist if you are going to demonstrate to your editors, and the media owners who employ you, that you can be trusted.

For example, if you write about US-Iran relations, you need to ensure that your history book starts in 1979. That was the year Iranian students started a 444-day occupation of the US embassy in Tehran. This was the event that 'led to four decades of mutual hostility', [according to](#) BBC News. On no account should you dwell on the [CIA-led coup in 1953](#) that overthrew the democratically-elected Iranian leader, Mohammad Mossadegh. Even better if you just omit any mention of this.

You should definitely not quote Noam Chomsky who [said](#) in 2013 that:

'the crucial fact about Iran, which we should begin with, is that for the past 60 years, not a day has passed in which the U.S. has not been torturing Iranians.'
(Our emphasis)

As Chomsky notes, the US (with UK support) installed the Shah, a brutal dictator, described by Amnesty International as one of the worst, most extreme torturers in the world, year after year. That ordinary Iranians might harbour some kind of grievance towards Uncle Sam as a result should not be prominent in 'responsible' journalism. Nor should you note, as Chomsky does, that:

'When he [the Shah] was overthrown in 1979, the U.S. almost immediately turned to supporting Saddam Hussein in an assault against Iran, which killed hundreds of thousands of Iranians, used extensive use of chemical weapons. Of course, at the same time, Saddam attacked his Kurdish population with horrible chemical weapons attacks. The U.S. supported all of that.'

As a 'good' journalist, you should refrain from referring to the US as the world's most dangerous rogue state, or by making any Chomskyan comparison between the US and the Mafia:

'We're back to the Mafia principle. In 1979, Iranians carried out an illegitimate act: They overthrew a tyrant that the United States had imposed and supported, and moved on an independent path, not following U.S. orders. That conflicts with the Mafia doctrine, by which the world is pretty much ruled. Credibility must be maintained. The godfather cannot permit independence and successful defiances, in the case of Cuba. So, Iran has to be punished for that.'

As a reliable journalist, there is also no need to dwell on the [shooting down](#) of Iran Air flight 655 over the Persian Gulf by the US warship *Vincennes* on July 3, 1988. All 290 people on board the plane were killed, including 66 children. President Ronald Reagan [excused](#) the mass killing as ‘a proper defensive action’. Vice-President George H.W. Bush [said](#): ‘I will never apologize for the United States — I don’t care what the facts are. ... I’m not an apologize-for America kind of guy.’

The US has never forgiven Iran for its endless ‘defiance’ in trying to shirk off Washington’s impositions. Harsh and punitive sanctions on Iran, that had been removed under the [2015 nuclear deal](#), have now been [restored](#) by President Donald Trump. Trump has also decided to [pull out of the INF](#), the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, with Russia. This is the landmark nuclear arms pact signed in 1987 by President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

But ‘balanced’ journalism need not focus on the [enhanced threat](#) of nuclear war, or the [diplomatic options](#) that the US has ignored or trampled upon. Instead, journalism is to be shaped by the narrative framework that it is the US that is behaving responsibly, and that Iran is the gravest threat to world peace. Thus, BBC News [reports](#) that US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has:

‘warned that the US will exert “relentless” pressure on Iran unless it changes its “revolutionary course”.’

BBC News adds:

‘Iran’s President Hassan Rouhani earlier struck a defiant tone, saying the country will “continue selling oil”.

“We will proudly break the sanctions,” he told economic officials.’

Good reporters know that Official Enemies resisting US imperialism must always be described as ‘defiant’. But the term is rarely, if ever, applied to the imperial power implementing oppressive measures.

BBC News dutifully reported Pompeo’s comments:

‘The Iranian regime has a choice: it can either do a 180-degree turn from its outlaw course of action and act like a normal country, or it can see its economy crumble.’

A good reporter knows not to critically appraise, far less ridicule, the idea that the US is an exemplar of ‘a normal country’, rather than being an outlaw state that outrageously threatens to make another country’s economy ‘crumble’ for refusing to obey US orders.

Don’t Talk About The Israel Lobby



Another rule of corporate journalism is to downplay the influence of the Israel lobby in British politics; or just pretend it doesn't exist. Moreover, you can boost your credentials by reporting from within the skewed, [pro-Israel narrative](#) that Jeremy Corbyn, a lifelong campaigner against racism, has succumbed to antisemitism. Even better if you can somehow link him to a horrific event, such as the recent murder of eleven worshippers at a Pittsburgh synagogue by a far-right white supremacist. That's what [Christina Patterson](#), a newspaper columnist, [did](#) on Sky News. She [said](#):

'I have to say in our own country, the Labour party has had a very heavy shadow of antisemitism hanging over it for much of this year... I know that Jeremy Corbyn and his colleagues have tried to say that it's not a problem.'

This was a blatant smear.

If you work for BBC News, it is especially important that stories have an appropriate headline and narrative framework: namely, one that promotes Israel's perspective and also obscures the agency involved when Palestinians have been killed by Israelis. Thus, a story about three young Palestinians, aged 13 and 14, killed in an Israeli air attack should be [titled](#):

'Gaza youths "killed planting bomb"'

And definitely not:

'Israel kills three Palestinian children'

Otherwise, you – or more likely your superiors – are likely to receive a phone call from the Israeli embassy in London. As a senior BBC News producer once [told](#) Professor Greg Philo of the Glasgow Media Group:

'We wait in fear for the telephone call from the Israelis'.

This helps keep journalists in line.

It is also important not to watch, far less report, one recent [film](#) the Israel lobby doesn't want the public to see. Titled, 'The Lobby – USA', it is a four-part undercover investigation by *Al Jazeera* into Israel's covert influence in the United States. The film was completed in October 2017. However, it was not shown after Qatar, the gas-rich Gulf emirate that funds *Al*

Jazeera, 'came under intense Israel lobby pressure not to air the film.' The *Electronic Intifada* website has obtained a copy of the film and has now [published](#) the episodes.

In Britain, an *Al Jazeera* [undercover sting operation](#) on key members of the Israel lobby last year [revealed](#) a £1 million plot by the Israeli government to undermine Corbyn. It's best to look the other way, however, if you are an aspiring journalist in the 'mainstream'. In particular, if you work for BBC News or the *Guardian*, you certainly do not wish to draw attention to a recent [report](#) by the [Media Reform Coalition](#) (MRC) about inaccuracies and distortions in media coverage of antisemitism and the Labour Party. The BBC and the *Guardian* were among the worst offenders.

Over one month after the damning report was published, *Guardian* editor Katharine Viner has still said nothing in public about it (as far as we are aware), despite being [prompted](#) by us, and many others, [more](#) than once. Perhaps unsurprisingly, not a single person at the *Guardian* has so much as mentioned it; including those columnists, notably Owen Jones and George Monbiot, the public is encouraged to regard as fearless radicals. Justin Schlosberg, the lead author of the report, has now published an [open letter](#) to the *Guardian* readers' editor on behalf of the MRC. He wrote:

'Both before and since publishing our research, which raised serious concerns about the Guardian's coverage of antisemitism within the Labour Party, we have made strident efforts to engage in constructive dialogue with both editorial and public affairs staff. Unfortunately, these efforts do not appear to have born any fruit to date. There has also been no reporting or commenting on our research, despite the significant public debate and controversy that it sparked. We nevertheless continue to hope and expect that a reflexive and considered response to the evidence will be forthcoming.'

Respected media academics – including Robert McChesney, Greg Philo, James Curran, David Miller and many others – are [clear](#) that the MRC report on coverage of antisemitism and Labour is serious and requires addressing:

'It is imperative that news institutions—especially the BBC and those newspapers who pride themselves on fair and accurate reporting—answer to these findings. It is not enough to simply dismiss the research on the basis of presumed bias without engaging constructively with the research, including the notably cautious approach adopted by the researchers.'

The statement continued:

'Silence or blanket dismissal will only speak volumes about the widely sensed malaise in our free press and public service media. A functioning democracy depends on a functioning fourth estate.'

The academics' statement went unheeded by the 'mainstream' media; thus highlighting the dearth of a functioning fourth estate, and the grievous lack of a functioning democracy.

Attack Julian Assange



As a 'mainstream' journalist, you also need to ensure that you treat WikiLeaks co-founder Julian Assange with the requisite amount of contempt and ridicule. Thus, 'impartial' BBC News featured a [story](#) on its website titled, 'Julian Assange given feline ultimatum by Ecuador'. Assange, the BBC said, had:

'been given a set of house rules at the Ecuadorean embassy in London that include cleaning his bathroom and taking better care of his cat.'

The original version of the article even included a [fake quote](#), 'Save water, don't shower', from a parody Julian Assange Twitter account; possibly a symptom of an over-eager BBC reporter trying to make Assange look as ridiculous as possible.

In similar vein, *The Times* ran a [piece](#) titled, 'Clean up after your cat or else, Ecuadorian embassy tells Julian Assange', followed later by another article with the flippant [headline](#), 'Ecuadorian Embassy tires of Julian Assange's kickabouts and skateboarding'. The *Express* went with 'Feline fine? Assange's cat needs Embassy assistance' (October 17, 2018; article not found online). The *Guardian*, which [benefited](#) from an earlier collaboration with WikiLeaks and Assange, published a flippant [piece](#) titled, 'How to get rid of an unwanted housemate' which chuckled:

'The Ecuadorians are fed up with their longtime lodger, Julian Assange. But many of us have had a nightmare flatmate. Here's how to get them to leave.'

By contrast, Italian journalist [Stefania Maurizi](#), doing actual journalism, [wrote](#):

'While the media focused on Julian Assange's cat rather than his continuing arbitrary detention, evidence shows that Britain worked hard to force his extradition to Sweden where Assange feared he could then be turned over to the U.S.'

Maurizi pointed out that Sweden dropped its investigation in May 2017, after Swedish prosecutors had questioned Assange in London, as he had always asked. She added:

'Although the Swedish probe was ultimately terminated, Assange remains confined. No matter that the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention established that the WikiLeaks founder has been arbitrarily detained since 2010, and that he should be freed and compensated. The UK, which encourages other states to respect international law, doesn't care about the decision by this UN body whose opinions are respected by the European Court of Human Rights. After trying to appeal the UN decision and losing the appeal, Britain is simply ignoring it. There is no end in sight to Assange's arbitrary

detention.'

Real journalists would be hugely concerned by the implications of someone publishing details of war crimes and corruption being targeted by a state and threatened with extradition and long-term imprisonment. But, as the Canadian writer [Joe Emersberger says](#), the 'Assange case shows support for free speech depends on who's talking'.

Independent journalist [Caitlin Johnstone notes](#) that what 'empire loyalists' in corporate media 'are really saying when they bash Julian Assange' is that they can be trusted to protect establishment interests. Of course, it is all the easier to attack Assange knowing that he has essentially been silenced in the Ecuadorean embassy. He is also at serious risk of [deteriorating health](#) if he is unable to leave the embassy soon without the risk of being extradited to the US.

At the time of writing, he still apparently has no access to the internet. His mother, Christine Assange, has just issued an urgent and impassioned [plea](#) to raise awareness of his plight:

'This is not a drill. This is an emergency. The life of my son...is in immediate and critical danger.'

She [adds](#) that:

'A new, impossible, inhumane set of rules and protocols was implemented at the embassy to torture him to such a point that he will break and be forced to leave.'

She warns that if her son leaves the embassy, he will be extradited to the US, given a 'show trial', face detention 'in Guantanamo Bay, 45 years in a maximum-security prison, or even the death penalty.'

Meanwhile, as Johnstone adds, the message sent out by would-be careerists smearing and laughing at Assange is:

'Hey! Look at me! You can count on me to advance whatever narratives get passed down from on high! I'll cheer on all the wars! I'll play up the misdeeds of our great nation's rivals and ignore the misdeeds of our allies! [...] I will be a reliable mouthpiece of the ruling class regardless of who is elected in our fake elections to our fake official government. [...] I understand what you want me to do without your explicitly telling me to do it. [...] Look, I'm even joining in the dog pile against a political prisoner who can't defend himself.'

Soft-Pedal Fascism

Another rule to abide by as a corporate journalist is to worship the global economy, excusing or even acclaiming the rise of extreme right-wing politicians because that leads to possible gains for big business. As [Alan MacLeod](#), of the Glasgow University Media Group, observed in a recent [piece](#) for [Fairness and Accuracy In Reporting](#), the financial press cheered the election of a fascist president in Brazil:

'Jair Bolsonaro was an army officer during Brazil's fascist military dictatorship (1964-85), which he [defends](#), maintaining that its only error was not killing enough people.'

He is set to apply 'shock therapy' to Brazil, initiating 'a fire sale of state assets and an opening up of the country's vast natural resources for foreign exploitation', including the Amazon. Moreover, he has threatened to unleash a wave of violence on the working class, minorities and the left.

Bolsonaro stood against the centre-left Workers' Party candidate Fernando Haddad. International markets, and therefore the financial press, clearly wanted Bolsonaro to win, observes MacLeod. Socialism is never popular with business and financial elites, after all.

MacLeod notes that Bolsonaro was elected with just 55.5 per cent of the vote after former leftist President Lula da Silva, by far the [most popular candidate](#), had been jailed and barred from running on [highly questionable charges](#). After being elected, Bolsonaro brazenly [appointed](#) the prosecutor who jailed Lula as Justice Minister in the new Brazilian government.

The *Financial Times* reported that the markets were '[cheering](#)' Bolsonaro's lead in the presidential race. The FT also noted surging stocks in weapons companies and a boost to the general economy as Bolsonaro's performance '[heartened investors](#)'.

MacLeod concluded:

'When it comes to opportunities for profits, all else is forgotten. After all, fascism is big business.'

Of course, a 'real' journalist would never say something like that.

An opinion piece on the business-oriented *Bloomberg* website [proclaimed](#):

'Brazil's Bolsonaro Completes a U.S. Sweep of South America.'

Adding:

'Other than Venezuela — and only for as long as Maduro holds on — the continent is now U.S.-friendly.'

The piece was written by James Stavridis, a retired U.S. Navy admiral and former military commander of NATO.

As journalist Ben Norton [summed up](#) via Twitter:

'I repeat for the umpteenth time: capitalism and imperialism infinitely prefer fascism over socialism. Capitalist imperialism wholeheartedly embraces fascists, while murdering socialists. This ex-commander of U.S. Southern Command is bragging about this.'

‘Responsible’ journalism means providing a regular, amplified outlet for imperial-friendly ‘analysis’. As Jonathan Cook [pointed out](#) recently, Bolsonaro is ‘a monster engineered by our media’. In other words, in much the same way that the corporate media facilitated the rise of Donald Trump to become US president.

Bury UK Responsibility for Yemen’s Nightmare

There are always exceptions to the rules. Patrick Cockburn, a long-time foreign correspondent with *The Independent*, is an example of a journalist who questions established ‘truths’. For almost two years, the corporate media have cited a UN figure of 10,000 Yemenis who have been killed in the US-and UK-backed Saudi war. Recently, Cockburn [pointed out](#) that this figure grossly downplays the real, catastrophic death toll which is likely in the range 70,000-80,000.

Cockburn interviewed Andrea Carboni, a researcher with the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED). This is an independent group formerly associated with the University of Sussex. Carboni is focusing attention on the real casualty level in Yemen. He estimates the number killed between January 2016 and October 2018 to be 56,000 civilians and combatants. When he completes his research, Carboni told Cockburn that he expects to find a total of between 70,000 and 80,000 victims who have died since the start of the Saudi-led assault in the Yemen civil war in March 2015.

Cockburn adds:

‘The number is increasing by more than 2,000 per month as fighting intensifies around the Red Sea port of Hodeidah. It does not include those dying of malnutrition, or diseases such as cholera.’

In fact, [figures](#) from UNICEF and Save the Children show that between January 2016 and November 2017, at least 113,000 Yemeni children died from preventable causes; mostly disease and malnutrition.

In an [interview](#) with Ben Norton on [The Real News Network](#), Cockburn points out that, despite the horrendous scale of this suffering, it is being given minimal news coverage:

‘It’s horrific. And you know, it’s not- a point, actually, that the UN was making recently, I don’t think got picked up very much, was, you know, that famines are pretty uncommon. You know, there was a famine in Somalia some years ago. There was another smaller one in South Sudan. But a famine like this, as big as this, this is very uncommon. I mean, it’s entirely manmade. And one could say it’s been taking place in view of the whole world. But actually it isn’t, because the news of it isn’t being reported.’

Cockburn also highlights a study by Professor Martha Mundy, titled ‘Strategies of the Coalition in the Yemen War: Aerial Bombardment and Food War’, concluding that the Saudi-led bombing campaign, which is supported by the US and the UK, deliberately targeted food production and storage facilities. (See also our [media alert](#), ‘Yemen Vote - The Responsibility To Protect Profits’).

As a well-established veteran reporter of impressive credentials, Cockburn can report such uncomfortable truths without suffering career oblivion. But woe betide any young journalist

trying to make their way in the 'mainstream' who tries to do likewise. Instead, they should follow the example of Patrick Wintour, the *Guardian's* diplomatic editor, who performs contortions to provide a fictitious 'balance' in a [recent piece](#) on Yemen. Wintour refers to mere 'claims' that the UK 'is siding too much with the Saudis'. The Orwellian language continues with the description of Saudi Arabia as a 'defence partner' of Britain.

The sub-heading under the main title of Wintour's article gives prominence to the perspective of the UK Defence Secretary:

'Jeremy Hunt says cessation of hostilities could "alleviate suffering" of Yemeni people.'

As the historian and foreign policy analyst Mark Curtis [observed](#) via Twitter:

'This sub-heading is a microcosm of what a joke the Guardian is. After over 3 yrs of UK govt's total backing of mass murder in Yemen, the paper has the temerity to equate UK policy with easing humanitarian suffering. The state could not ask for more.'

Aspiring journalists should take note of the state-corporate requirement to bury the bloody reality of 'defence' and the huge profits that must be protected.

Curtis also recently [highlighted](#) an [admission](#) by the Ministry of Defence that has seemingly gone under the radar of the corporate media:

'Oh, so Saudi pilots *are* being trained at RAF Valley in Wales (Anglesey).
<https://bit.ly/2qiNkrN>'

It would also not do for those hoping for a career in journalism to examine the daily contortions and sleight-of-hand pronouncements emanating daily from government departments. Thank goodness, then, for Curtis who regularly highlights the distasteful [deceits](#) that are churned out by the UK state.

We [tweeted](#) BBC News about the buried truth that the UK is training Saudi pilots, even as Saudi Arabia commits war crimes in Yemen:

'Hello @BBCNews. Perhaps you could devote a decent amount of coverage to this? Or would you rather keep the public in the dark about the extent of UK government complicity in #Yemen's nightmare?'

As ever, the BBC did not respond.

In short, being a reliable 'mainstream' journalist entails a number of basic rules including: propagating the myth that 'we' are the good guys; conforming to the requirements of wealth and power; keeping one's head down and never challenging authority in any deep or sustained way; and refraining from any public discussion about these rules.

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